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Operational Commanders: It's Time to Take Command...of the Media

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

03 February 2003

Abstract

There have been many research efforts that have looked at the significant role played by the media in times of war and peace. The relationship between the military and media has been analyzed thoroughly, nevertheless neither side has found a consistent way to deal with the other. Operational commanders have a lot of influence on how this relationship will unfold. In order to be successful in dealing with the media in future operations, operational commanders must better understand all aspects of their role regarding the media. This includes understanding the nature of the media, reacting to their mistakes, using them to win the war and fostering a command climate conducive to media involvement. Although human nature undoubtedly plays a part in this relationship, operational commanders will find that treating the media similar to how they treat their own troops will go a long way in helping them accomplish their mission. Simply put, operational commanders can and should *command* the media.

Introduction

Throughout the history of war, there are numerous examples of leaders who have commanded enormous armies against formidable opponents with much success. Nevertheless, there are only a few operational commanders, in a time of war or peace, who have been able to conquer a much less intimidating foe—the media. With all the changes that have taken place in modern warfare, two actors that have always been present are the operational commander and the media. However, even with doctrine to guide them, the ability to truly command the media continues to escape most commanders. The current war on terrorism is no exception. In order to be successful in dealing with the press in future operations, operational commanders must better understand all aspects of their role regarding the media. This includes understanding the nature of the media, reacting to their mistakes, using them to help win the war and fostering a command climate conducive to media involvement.

Since the Vietnam War, operational commanders have seen firsthand how the media can influence the outcome of a conflict. However, this influence was one that the military rarely welcomes, plans for, or uses to their advantage. Since Vietnam, high-ranking military officers, including former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and current Secretary of State, Colin Powell have tried to change how operational commanders think about the media. “Once you’ve got all the forces moving and everything’s being taken care of by the commanders...turn your attention to television because you can win the battle or lose the war if you don’t handle the story right.”¹ Most operational commanders have heeded this advice, including former CENTCOM Commander General Anthony

Zinni, who admits, "In many of today's operations, media relations can prove to be more important than fire and maneuver in determining the outcome."²

Recent operations in Afghanistan have shown that although the impact of the media on military operations can not be denied, operational commanders still have not mastered the art. One reporter reflected that "Desert Storm and Afghanistan were overwhelming U.S. military victories. But since journalists were barred from the front lines or herded into "media pools" far from the action, it was impossible to show the American mothers and fathers what their sons and daughters were doing over there."³

Although the notion of *commanding* the media sounds authoritative and controlling, this paper will introduce a perspective far from this perception. Command is about allowing people to do their job in a way that helps benefit the entire mission. If the commander carries out his or her job right and allows the media to do the same, the benefits can go far beyond mission accomplishment. Indeed this is a relationship that can help change policy, influence budgets and win wars.

Analysis

In order to understand their role in dealing with the media, operational commanders must first comprehend the nature of the media and what to expect from it. According to Washington Post Pentagon Correspondent, Tom Ricks, operational commanders “somewhat” understand the needs of the media, but generally they do not.⁴ First and foremost, military leaders need to realize that regardless of the combat situation, the media will be present in some form. Great numbers of media will cover military operations anywhere in the world and in great detail.⁵ The effects of this reality have still not resonated to the highest levels of operational command. “The military has been slow to learn that it has lost two of its traditional wartime monopolies. It can no longer control access to the battle zone, as proven by the numerous correspondents who were on the ground in Afghanistan even before American combat troops. In addition, it can no longer exert command over the instant flow of information from those fields of combat in an era of inexpensive satellite communication.”⁶ Expecting the media to be in the combat zone with advanced technology prior to U.S. forces is just the beginning of the expectations required by commanders. Some are even more profound. For instance, the media mistrust official statements or accounts. They will always need access to information of any large-scale military movements and will speculate on destinations.⁷ Starting with these expectations, expressed by former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Hugh Shelton, is a must for any operational commander.

The success of U.S. forces in the Gulf War has raised the bar of what is expected of the military. The media has come to anticipate the U.S. military to win decisively with

minimal casualties. “Anything less may be reported as a failure.”⁸ Understandably, these expectations can typically make operational commanders weary of the media’s presence during a wartime situation, when the stakes are extremely high. For the global war on terrorism, operational commanders face even a greater challenge because they have to protect their forces as well as maintain public enthusiasm for a war on terror that could go on indefinitely. That’s a tough job, and keeping the media under wraps is one way of doing it.⁹ However, expecting the aforementioned conditions and preparing for the media is a better alternative than neglecting them altogether. Indeed, ignoring the media does not make them go away—it just forces them to contact alternative sources for their stories.¹⁰

Even with all of these daunting expectations, operational commanders maintain a distinct advantage over the media in the present day as much as ever because for a significant portion of the news from the battlefield, reporters know they must depend on the military. The stealth, cruise-missile, fire from 40,000 feet technology behind modern air wars, in which the shooters are not even within sight of the enemy, is making reporters more and more dependent on what the Pentagon tells them.¹¹ And even though the media has made significant advances in technology as well, at least one Pentagon correspondent believes, when push comes to shove, they still need the military. “No matter what the advances in technology, the media must still rely on the military for information concerning its activities and operations,” says NBC Pentagon correspondent Jim Miklaszewski.¹²

Therefore, even though commanders must embrace seemingly high expectations of the media, the nature of the relationship is not as unappealing as it may appear.

Ultimately, the media wants to deliver news to the public, and as we will see, the commander has a lot of influence on what that message will be. In every two-way relationship, there is one side who rises to the role of leader and takes command of a situation. Understanding the needs and expectations of the media immediately puts operational commanders at an advantage in any scenario.

Even if operational commanders understand the nature of the media, how they react after the media makes a mistake can be critical to future reporting of the campaign, and possibly even the outcome of the campaign. Security is usually the area of greatest contention between the media and military and thus, it leads to the most drastic reactions. For example, only a few days into Operation Allied Force, alarms about media coverage began to sound in the Pentagon. At least one of the new 24-hour TV news channels was broadcasting live video of U.S. warplanes taking off from their bases in Italy, potentially giving Serbian air defense gunners critical advance warning. Then, *The Washington Post* published a front-page article identifying two of the NATO air campaign's Belgrade targets. The problem was that the targets hadn't been hit yet.¹³ This series of reporting led to a clamp down of information by the U.S. European Commander General Wesley Clark, and as a result the coverage became more and more restrictive. Near real-time reports by the media have frequently led to less access to the war zone. However, less access to the battle is not the answer because that leads to another problem. In the case of Operation Allied Force, Americans lost interest in the military's efforts. In fact, some reporters felt that the "sterile nature of the war...led to the American public's apparent lack of engagement in the war effort."¹⁴

Without a doubt the rationale that's almost invariably advanced for keeping journalists far from the battlefield is that journalistic disclosures could compromise the security of military objectives and the lives of U.S. troops. This explanation was used frequently in Afghanistan according to two journalists who asked to see the training area where four Canadian soldiers were killed by an American bomb in April 2002. "It wasn't until two months after the accident, long after investigators had been through the area, that we were permitted to do so. Operational security was invoked by the military again and again as the reason for denying journalists access to stories...that's how the Army played things, sometimes to the point of absurdity."¹⁵

This approach backfired later in the campaign when U.S. AC-130 gunships were summoned to strike a crescent of southern Afghan villages, and wound up killing or wounding scores of civilians. The Pentagon blamed Taliban fighters for placing women and children near valid military targets and for firing antiaircraft artillery at the American warplanes. Due to operational security, the media was not allowed to cover the mission. "Correspondents who got to the scene—on their own and after the attack—were told a different story by villagers, that a wedding party was taking place."¹⁶

Operational commanders often forget that public opinion is formed through television. Furthermore they need to understand that "leaders communicate directly to each other through CNN and shape events through a dialogue of images."¹⁷ Therefore, operational commanders need to seize every opportunity to reap the benefits of their actions. According to ABC military correspondent John McWethy, the war on terror has driven this point home for military leaders. "They realize now that a huge part of winning any war has to do with the world perception of how that war is being fought. If

there are no independent eyes watching what's happening in a particular village, with a particular unit, the people who don't agree with what the U.S. is doing can have a tremendous advantage in shaping public opinion."¹⁸

Operational commanders can also use the media to communicate with their enemies. For example, the Navy can show the broad range of their threat capabilities from CONUS departures of naval forces to off-the-beach presence, including amphibious assault capabilities, thus encouraging the enemy to react and expend considerable effort and resources to counter the threat. In Operations Desert Shield/Storm, it was clear that the Iraqis used CNN television as an intelligence source.¹⁹ According to one Army Special Forces major, "Saddam Hussein is a practiced liar. What better way to combat disinformation on the battlefield than to have you report objectively what the situation really is?"²⁰

In addition to being concerned about talking to their enemies, operational commanders can use the media to communicate with their internal audience as well. This internal audience is made up primarily of servicemembers and their immediate families. The reason a busy commander must learn to practice good media relations skills in war or in peace is not for personal publicity or gratification, but for recognition for our people—to tell their story to their families and the general public. The blame is usually at our own doorstep for not seizing the opportunity to tell our people's story.²¹

With all these uses of the media, operational commanders need to be cognizant that how a command or unit deals with the media has a profound effect on which stories the media chooses to run. If a command is not conducive to media involvement, this will resonate on television and in the papers. During the Persian Gulf War, Army censors

delayed releasing news stories they feared would generate adverse publicity, which resulted in the stories thrown out by deadline-driven editors, but consequently generated bad feelings between the Army and the press. In doing so, the Army missed a tremendous opportunity to use the media to show the American public how well the Army performed in the desert war. In contrast, Marines in the Gulf, led by a commander with extensive press experience, Lieutenant General Walter Boomer, went out of their way to be open and to assist the press, which contributed to extremely positive press coverage.²²

The perceptions about how different the media is from the military have a lot to do with the command climate. And these perceptions begin at the top of the chain of command. This was demonstrated at a symposium following the Persian Gulf War, when Peter Jennings of ABC News was offered the hypothetical opportunity to go behind enemy lines to accept the offer of an enemy of the United States to see for himself proof of atrocities by a U.S. ally. And then, while accompanying an enemy patrol, it was posited that Jennings would find himself in the middle of preparations for the ambush of a unit of the U.S. ally accompanied by American advisers. Would he warn the unit? Although Jennings, after hesitating said he would warn the Americans, Mike Wallace of CBS News responded that he would regard it simply as another story that he was there to cover and that he would not feel a “higher duty” to warn Americans. In response to Wallace, Marine Colonel George M. Connell remarked, “I feel utter contempt. Two days later those same two journalists [could be] caught in an ambush and are lying wounded 200 yards from my positions, and they expect that I’m going to send Marines to get them. They’re not Americans. They’re just journalists.”²³

Some believe the media and military are on opposite sides of virtually every ideological divide, and there is evidence that gap is increasing. Furthermore, some see the natural tensions between the media and military as a struggle between the “anarchists” and the “control freaks.”²⁴

However, for as many differences the media and military appear to have on the surface, operational commanders should know there are equally as many similarities. The pressure on the decision-maker is one of them. This pressure is common to all news media and it is probably the area of closest association with the military. The requirement to make decisions under the pressure of time, often frustrated by inadequate information, is shared by the military and the news media. Both are probably more time-orientated than most other professions and this dictates the way they do business. Both require considerable self-sacrifice and professionalism from the respective members of their team and this is directly related to good leadership and management.²⁵

It is clear that the media offers the commander a lot of resources, which would undoubtedly help in efforts to win the war. Through the media, the operational commander can show the international world the U.S. side of the story. He can also communicate with his enemies as well as his internal audience. If the heart of *command* is about maximizing the capabilities of all of the assets at a leader’s disposal, any capable commander should see the value in commanding the media. Just like the Sailors, Airmen, Soldiers and Marines attached to a unit, the media are professionals with whom the commander should extract the most benefit. The following recommendations will help operational commanders realize how it is possible to *command* the media.

Recommendations

1. Give the media access

Beginning in November 2002, the Pentagon conducted a series of boot camps for members of the media to help prepare reporters for the challenges of combat, and also teach them how not to be a burden to the forces they are covering, or as Pentagon spokesperson Victoria Clarke puts it, “to raise the comfort level.”²⁶ Reporters, like Tom Ricks, remain skeptical as to whether or not these training sessions will lead to more access to the front-lines. “It might be a way of appearing to be open during any possible Iraq War—without making the commitment to do so.”²⁷ Media boot camps are a step in the right direction, but undoubtedly the one point of them was to get the message to commanders that it was up to them to make it work.²⁸

Embedding the media with American forces should be standard Department of Defense policy. And likewise, operational commanders need to embrace and support the embedding of the media with as many of their forces as possible. General Shelton used this technique in Haiti with much success, “...having reporters stay with the units resulted in soldiers’ stories being told accurately and with understanding...if reporters share the same hardships as soldiers, they deserve to be treated with respect and given access.”²⁹ Nevertheless, in recent operations in Afghanistan, the idea of embedding to Ricks meant “taking a bunch of reporters to one camp, and marching them around as a group to give the military PR opportunities.”³⁰

In order to embed the media, Ricks says, “you would need a clear understanding of the ground rules.”³¹ This is where operational leaders will need to take command of

the media. The rules should be similar to those of any American servicemember fighting in the arena. Just as soldiers are told of the mission before it takes place, journalists should be given the same information. This happened with much success in Haiti. The media was merged into operational units before the invasion began, making “images of pool reporters typing a story on his laptop while in front of classified maps of Port-au-Prince” the norm. As a result, there were “no leaks” of the mission to the public.³² Evidence supports the notion that since the terrorist attacks of September 11th, reporters are taking operational security even more seriously. Even Victoria Clarke, the Pentagon’s chief spokesperson, conceded that last year that the overwhelming majority of Pentagon correspondents “support completely our concerns about operational security and troop safety.” Often, she said, reporters checked with her voluntarily before publishing or broadcasting information they thought could put U.S. forces or operations at risk.³³ And as anyone in command knows, there are limits to the amount of information that can be given to those who are not in command. In such circumstances, commanders need to weigh the risk involved with relaying highly sensitive security information to any person, whether a troop or a journalist. However, commanders should always give as much information as they can up to the point of the risk outweighing the troop or journalist’s perceived need for this knowledge.

2. Make the media accountable

In return for this open access to American forces, reporters would need to sign stringent ground rules that would make them just as accountable for their actions as any member of the American armed forces fighting in the arena. Any breach of operational

security based ground rules would immediately result in the member's dismissal from the operation and any other near term military engagement. Just as a troop's compromising of security would not be tolerated, neither should a breach by the media. Furthermore, a second infraction of these security-related ground rules by the same organization would mean the immediate revocation of the credentials of that media organization. For example, if Joe Smith of WXYZ puts troops in danger during an opening assault on the invasion of Iraq, WXYZ would be barred from any inclusion to U.S. troops. Meanwhile every other organization would continue to receive access to operations. There would need to be a systematic way to immediately review the actions by an independent board to confirm the allegations and uphold the finding that security-based ground rules were broken. The Joint Information Bureau (JIB) could organize such a board and make recommendations to the operational commander, who could then revoke access to that particular member. More research would be needed to determine the types of punishment that could be levied against the media for security violations.

Whether or not the media would accept such a no-tolerance policy in regards to operational security remains to be seen. Nevertheless, their dependence on access to U.S. troops is clear, according to one reporter, "Sending reporters to the enemy camp doesn't accomplish much anymore because the likes of Milosevic and Hussein will allow journalists to see the damages that allied bombs inflict, but not what horrors their own forces are causing."³⁴ Strict rules with actionable consequences, combined with being embedded with the troops, should give journalists extra incentive to be careful about the timing of their reports. A critical requirement of being in command is to thoroughly explain the rules of engagement to those under command, keeping these rules as clear

and consistent as possible. Just as there are rules governing how American armed forces fight a war, likewise, there should be rules for how the media cover it.

Since reporters would be accountable for their actions, so too should operational commanders, who have refused access to the media without considering the arguments in this paper. There is plenty of data to support the fact that the mishandling of the media has led to reports that have been detrimental to the public's opinion of military action. The most familiar example in Afghanistan happened when reporters were locked in a warehouse and denied access to wounded troops returning from a combat mission. Since public opinion is such a critical part of the outcome of any war, military members should be responsible for any actions they commit which could adversely affect the mission.

3. Provide escorts only when required

Nothing is more frustrating to the media than having escorts with them everywhere they go. "I hate having an escort—especially ones who hover over the troops and try to shape their quotes. The only time I like it is when I need a vehicle and the escort has one," says Tom Ricks.³⁵ Relaxing the escort requirements, unless there is the potential for serious harm for the journalist, would be seen a good faith gesture by the operational command. It would also free-up troops who could be used in a more combat-related role. In exchange, media companies should only send experienced military reporters to cover U.S. forces. This policy may even raise the journalistic standards of objectivity and accuracy, which according to many media analysts have eroded in this age of instant reportage and rapid-fire analysis.³⁶

Conclusions

A key aspect to commanding the media is for operational commanders to turn the media's needs and expectations into their own advantages. There can be no doubt that when it comes to who has the most profound effect on the military/media relationship, it is the operational commander. "Once the United States deploys forces overseas, the commander becomes the lightning rod for everything that happens...he embodies the operation for the American public." Taking advantage of every opportunity the media offers is paramount to operational success because the images and words the media project are "powerful, moving and immediate and can influence national policy."³⁷

Command of the media should not be any more difficult for an experienced military leader than commanding the forces of any operational unit. In either case, the operational commander needs to let his people do their job. The only reason to prevent either the media or U.S. forces from doing their respective task is because security or one's safety could be compromised. In those instances, a prudent commander weighs the risks and decides on a course of action. However, the mindset for how the commander makes this decision, in regards to the media, need to be revised. The operational commander should no longer think of the media as an inhibitor to success, but moreover as a means to be successful.

Just as any professional soldier can and will make mistakes; operational commanders can expect the media to make some as well. If either compromises the security of the mission, there should be no tolerance and consequences should be taken. However, if the media make a mistake that is short of a security breach, the consequences

should not prohibit their involvement in the mission. Just as an operational commander needs every member of a squad to take a hill, he too needs the media to tell his side of the story. Command is about utilizing every asset at one's disposal. Overwhelmingly more times than not, the media will help you accomplish this mission.

It can not be denied that allowing access to the media ultimately comes down to the individual human nature of each operational commander. Even though the American public expects precision from the military, perfection in war is not attainable. Decisions will be made at every level of the chain of command with varying degrees of success. And if there were no media present, mistakes will never be open to the scrutiny of the public.

To the operational commander, in war, the good-guy is usually distinguishable from the bad guy. However this perception is not always as cut and dry to the American public. Vietnam drove this point home and will continue to haunt every operational commander in the future. Just as the operational commander's job is to get after the bad guy, so too is the media's. It is their nature and even more importantly, it is their responsibility to the American public. Operational commanders need to accept this fact and because of it they must constantly act in a way that is right and just in the eyes of all Americans, including the media. In the opinion of this researcher, the problem is not that most operational commanders are acting in a way that is unjust or un-American. The problem is that most operational commanders fear how the media will depict their actions, and as a result of this trepidation they deny them access and blame it on security concerns. Operational commanders who understand that the ultimate judge of their

actions is the American people and *not* the media, do not deny them access...they welcome it.

Openness and access is the duty of a democracy like the United States and all operational commanders. Doing what is right in the spotlight of the American public is the challenge a 24-hour media places on all operational commanders. This researcher never implied that an operational commander's job is easy. However, dealing with the media can be. If an operational commander considers the arguments in this paper and is able to *command* the media, this researcher believes he will be a more effective leader and communicator because of it.

Notes

¹ Brent Baker, "Desert Shield/Storm: The War of Words and Images," Naval War College Review. (Autumn 1991), 64.

² Anthony Zinni and Frederick M. Lorenz, "Media Relations: A Commander's Perspective," Marine Corps Gazette (December 1995), 67.

³ Dave Hirschman, "In the Trenches, Media Learn Rules for Gulf War," Atlanta Journal and Constitution, 26 December 2002, 1.

⁴ Tom Ricks, interview by author, 16 December 2002, Newport, RI., electronic mail, Naval War College, Newport, RI.

⁵ H. Hugh Shelton and Timothy D. Vane, "Winning the Information War in Haiti," Military Review, November-December 1995, 3.

⁶ Thom Shanker, "Pentagon Says It Will Give Journalists Access To Frontlines War Units," New York Times, 28 December 2002.

⁷ Shelton, 4.

⁸ Ibid, 4.

⁹ Mike Vernon, "The War We Couldn't Report," CBC News Online, 13 August 2002.

¹⁰ Shelton, 4.

¹¹ James Kitfield, "Command and Control the Messenger," National Journal, 11 September 1999, Pg. 2546.

¹² John F. Kirby, "Helping Shape Today's Battlefield: Public Affairs as an operational function," 02 May 2000, 5.

¹³ Kitfield, 8.

¹⁴ Ibid, 4.

¹⁵ Vernon, 2.

¹⁶ Shanker, 2.

¹⁷ Frank J. Stech. "Winning CNN Wars," Parameters, Autumn, 1994, 38.

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- ¹⁸ David Shaw, "Ex-publisher on a Mission to Reengage the Citizenry," Los Angeles Times Online, 24 November 2002, 1.
- ¹⁹ Baker, 64.
- ²⁰ Shanker, 2.
- ²¹ Baker, 64,
- ²² Stech, 47.
- ²³ William V. Kennedy, The Military and the Media. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishing, 1993, 65.
- ²⁴ Kitfield, 8.
- ²⁵ Alan Hooper. *The Military and the Media*. (Great Britain: Biddles, Ltd, Guildford and King's Lynn, 1982), 66.
- ²⁶ Deborah Hastings, "War Journalists Start Military Boot Camp In Norfolk," Associated Press, 19 November 2002, www.pilotonline.com.
- ²⁷ Ricks, 1.
- ²⁸ Shaw, 2.
- ²⁹ Shelton, 8.
- ³⁰ Shaw, 2.
- ³¹ Ricks, 2.
- ³² Shelton, 3.
- ³³ Shaw, 1.
- ³⁴ Kitfield, 2.
- ³⁵ Ricks, 1.
- ³⁶ Kitfield, 4.
- ³⁷ Shelton, 3.

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